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ABSTRACT

Basic skills lists, prepared by departments of education from five states within the United States, are examined in order to identify and define universal basic skills needed by teachers to instruct their pupils more effectively. Examination of these lists reveals that, although no single common definition of basic skills exists among the lists, three common threads can be seen: (1) the lists direct their primary attention to three major content areas -- reading, writing and mathematics; (2) they focus the teacher's attention on content; and (3) they evaluate achievement of a specific skill by measuring a child's knowledge of content. It is argued that in order to teach basic skills one must first identify and isolate these skills from content. While basic skills are defined as fundamental abilities that a child should acquire in order to use knowledge effectively, content is defined as the sum and substance of the essential knowledge contained in a field of study or in a subject matter area. Based on these definitions it is concluded that (1) basic skills are beginning points for the acquisition of additional abilities and knowledge and that regardless of nationality, school system, or ethnic background, basic skills are universal; and (2) only the content changes as the culture, the heritage, or the student's age changes. An appendix presents 40 basic skills from Tennessee's list, classified into six major categories: observing, classifying, sequencing, communicating, comprehending, and writing. (Author/MP)

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UNIVERSAL BASIC SKILLS: WHAT ARE THEY?

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UNIVERSAL BASIC SKILLS: WHAT ARE THEY?

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One of the major discussions in the United States today centers on which basic skills should be taught to children and what these skills are. It appears that this concern is shared by other countries. Although the Council of Europe's educational and cultural programs does not deal directly with the identification of basic skills, its 1974 Council of Cultural Co-operation, consisting of twenty (20) member nations, identified five main themes related to preschool education which it wished to investigate. Two of those themes were: the compensatory role of preschool education and the link between preschool and primary education.(Edwards-Amoroso, 1978) Further, in an article on the effectiveness of the Slovene preschool program, Tolicic (1974) reports a high number of repeaters in the elementary schools with about 30 per cent of the children unable to satisfactorily complete an eighth

grade education in an eight-year period. Although education in the People's Republic of China has developed rapidly in the past three years, it still does not meet the needs of the country, reports the Biejing Review, June, 1980. Fang Fi, Vice-Premier in charge of science and education, calls for a "major breakthrough in education" to alleviate this problem. Japanese families provide special tutoring for their children in an attempt to assure that they qualify for a college or university education. These reports directly implied need to examine the curriculum and the effectiveness of these countries' educational programs and indirectly implied the need for an examination of basic skills.

Educators throughout the world want their children literate in their language, capable of communicating in writing, and able to calculate. Yet a review of the literature and the lists of basic skills revealed little if any consensus on what the skills and their definitions are. Hence, a group of graduate students, all teachers, and I analyzed the basic skill lists which were prepared by departments of education from different states. The purpose of this examination was to clarify exactly what the basic skills are and how they are defined so that teachers can instruct their pupils more effectively. This paper reports our procedures, findings and conclusions.

First, we discovered that some of the basic skills lists are entitled "essential competencies;" others are labeled "survival or coping skills." Another list is called "basic

life competencies" or "concepts or learner outcomes." These lists include a wide range of subjects from reading, writing, and calculating to balancing a checkbook, computing item unit prices, and reasoning. While one list may be directed toward the education of the young child, another may focus on the competencies needed throughout life or at a specific age level. While most are concerned with academic knowledge, some include or focus on affective, psychomotor and social competencies. Some are general while others are quite specific. For example, statements such as these are found:

> The learner will identify some needs and wants. (West Virginia, 1977)
>
> The learner will identify human physical attributes in a positive way. (West Virginia, 1977)
>
> The student can recognize and name letter forms (capital and lower case). (Memphis, Tennessee, 1979)
>
> The student can count from 0 to 100. (Memphis, Tennessee, 1979)
>
> The student will exhibit knowledge of the letters of the alphabet and their sequence. (West Virginia, 1977)

Although diversity among the lists is quite evident, there are some common threads:

1. They (lists) direct their primary attention to three major <u>content</u> areas; reading, writing and mathematics;
2. They focus the teacher's attention on <u>content</u>;
3. They evaluate achievement of a specific <u>skill</u> by measuring a child's <u>knowledge of content</u>.

To illustrate:

1. The student can arrange story pictures in appropriate sequence (beginning, middle and end). (Tennessee, 1978)
2. By the end of the third grade, the student will be able to determine the meaning of a word in a sentence whose meaning has been affected by prefixes. (Michigan, 1979)
3. By the end of the third grade, the student will be able to identify a word that has a similar meaning to another word (identifying synonyms). (Michigan, 1979)

In each of these examples the instructor is concerned with teaching specific content, rather than the basic skill. Evaluation instruments are designed to measure the child's knowledge of content. They do not reveal a child's ability to perform a specific skill. To determine a child's ability to sequence, he or she should be presented with familiar objects or stories. What the child sequences is immaterial in this case. On the other hand, to assess the child's knowledge of the alphabet, he or she should be asked to recite it or to point to the letters. To be correct, the letters have to be in order, but ordering or sequencing is not assessed. It is the child's ability to recall or to memorize an arbitrary list of letters that is assessed.

Perhaps the appropriate goal is the latter -- the development of children's abilities to memorize and to recall. But, can we teach recalling or memorizing? The point here is that

skills must be identified and isolated from content if our goal is to teach basic skills rather than content.

What then are "the" basic skills and how can they be isolated from content? As previously mentioned, not a single definition of these skills seems to exist. According to New Mexico (1977) basic skills are "skills fundamental to other learning, i.e., fundamental skills in mathematics, reading and writing." Vermont (1977) uses this definition: "The Basic Competencies are objectives in the areas of Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, Mathematics and Reasoning. They are minimum skills necessary to enable further learning and social functioning." Anderson and Messick (1974) define basic skills as social competencies that allow an individual to effectively deal with every day experiences. These social competencies include cognitive and affective skills.

Typical examples of these skills are:

1. The individual can determine the sale price given the price of an article and a rate of discount. (New Mexico, 1977)
2. The individual can compute distances between two points using a map. (New Mexico, 1977)
3. The student develops acceptable manners in listening. (South Dakota, 1978)
4. The student learns to value writing as a means for learning. (South Dakota, 1978)

Because of the various definitions and because of the wide range of skills identified for different age groups,

Webster's Dictionary (1978) was consulted for clarification. Accordingly;

Basic means: of or pertaining to the base or essence; fundamental.

Skill means: understanding, judgement, reason or ground for doing; the ability to use one's knowledge effectively; a developed or acquired ability to make a difference.

From these definitons, we concluded that basic skills are fundamental abilities that a child should acquire to use knowledge effectively. Accepting this definition we further concluded that basic skills are beginning points for the acquisition of abilities which are expanded as the child acquires additional abilities and knowledge. Thus, a cluster of related abilities may comprise a basic skill. The transfer of a skill from one content area to another should be possible. They should be useable across and within content areas. The ability acquired to sequence a story is the same ability required to sequence objects. Or the ability to recognize differences in shapes requires the same ability to recognize familiar features in the environment.

Once a child has learned a basic skill, future development of that skill is an expansion or an extension of the original ability or skill. For example: the three year old who sequences two objects according to size is performing the same skill as the eight year old who sequences ten objects according to size, color, and shape or the same as the college student

who sequences the steps he followed in an experiment. The skill is refined and expanded while the content becomes more complex and complicated.

Further, we concluded that regardless of nationality, school system or ethnic background, basic skills are universal. Only the content changes as the culture, the heritage, or the age changes. An Indian child as well as an Arabian child should acquire the same basic skills in order to function within his or her society.

As suggested previously, content should be isolated from basic skills if our goal is to teach basic skills. Typically, lists referred to as basic skills instead are lists of the content that children at specific ages should learn. Whereas, the lists should reflect the skills or the abilities the individual should learn to manipulate and handle knowledge of the content. Again, in order to clarify the meaning of content, Webster was consulted.

> Content: that which is contained; the topics or matter treated is a document or the like; the sum and substance; the gist, as of a discourse; hence essential meaning; quantity of space or matter within certain limits; the matter dealt with by, or presented in a field of study.

Content is, we concluded, the sum and substance of the essential knowledge contained in a field of study or in a subject matter area. Content is the essential, specific knowledge a child should learn in reading, math, art, science,

social studies, music, etc. In short, content is knowledge of subject matter.

Further knowledge of certain basic content (subject matter) must be acquired before a child can understand the advance knowledge in that particular area. In other words, there is basic content as well as basic skills. For example: before a child can know the meaning of the numeral two, he or she must be able to label the numeral two. Before a child can add two and two, he or she must know the label for and meaning of four.

Piaget, in my view, suggests that content, according to my operational definition, is arbitrary knowledge -- knowledge that must be learned from others. There is no way that a child can discover a table. The child must be told that a table is an article of furniture consisting of a smooth flat surface with legs on it -- or that a table is a condensed tabulated statement of many particulars or values (as a table of contents or a table of logarithms).

A child may discover meanings, attributes, aspects or characteristics of arbitrary knowledge but cannot discover the label for it. To illustrate: a baby may play under, over, beside or on a table; but until someone labels the table, the baby does not know what it is. However, a child may discover that some tables have three legs; some are wooden while others are stone; some report relationships between two or more variables; or some are more useful than others. It is through the process of manipulating subject matter that basic

skills are acquired, refined, expanded and extended. Basic skills are the processes a child uses to manipulate knowledge.

Again we return to the point that basic skills and basic content must be separated if the goal is to assure that both are learned. Because skills and content are inextricably interwoven, the wisdom of separating them may be questioned. It is my position that a separation provides the opportunity to examine and analyze the relationship between instructional strategies, content, and children's cognitive development more accurately and efficiently. The basic skill must be as explicitly defined as is the basic content. Teaching content requires a different instructional strategy than teaching basic skills. When a teacher presents the child with content, the goal is for the child to acquire new knowledge. However, the content used to teach a basic skill is immaterial because the focus is on the skill and not on new knowledge. It matters not whether a child is sequencing rocks or a story if the objective is for him or her to learn sequencing. The teaching strategy in this case should be to ask questions so that the child can extend and refine the particular basic skill.

In short, to teach content the teacher uses a different instructional strategy than is used to teach a basic skill. It is possible for a child to know the content but not the skill. The child may retell a story (content) but may not retell it in sequence (basic skill). Few teachers actually instruct a child in the basic skills because they have not been explicitly defined. Consequently, skill statements are

subject to different interpretations. For example: the student will identify numerals 0 - 100; or the child will recognize numerals 0 to 100. What is the difference between identify and recognize? Is one a higher level skill than the other? If so, which comes first? Does identify mean that the child points to a numeral? Or does it mean that the child recites the numerals in order? Does recognize mean that the child looks at a numeral and names it? What is the difference between the child counting and the child recognizing numerals?

This may appear to be an argument over semantics until the lists of basic skills are examined closely. Then confusion emanates. One list states:

"The student can group objects and pictures into categories."

Is the skill grouping or classifying? Are these terms the same? Which should a child learn first: grouping or classifying?

Another example:

"The student can use correct phrasing in oral reading." From the same list is this statement: "The student can respond to simple punctuation in oral reading." (Tennessee, 1978)

What is the difference between using correct phrasing in oral reading and responding to simple punctuation in oral reading? Are those actually basic skills? Isn't using correct phrasing in oral reading a demonstration of using correct punctuation?

What are the differences between these skill statements? The student can:

listen to and identify words;

listen for the purpose of distinguishing like and unlike sounds;

hear the word that is different in a series of three words (cat, cat, dog). (Memphis, 1979)

Although we may agree that these basic skill expectations may be asking the child to perform exactly the same task or to know the same content, we may also assume that the authors of the lists must have thought each statement required a different level of performance, since they dealt with them individually. To add to the variations, some lists included items such as, "The student can handle books properly:" or "The student can hold a pencil properly and sit in the correct writing position;" or "The student can participate in a discussion." (Memphis, 1979; Arkansas, 1980; Virginia, 1977)

Careful scrutiny of Tennessee's (1978) list of basic expectations of children indicated that approximately 200 different action words were used interchangeably or synonomously to describe the same or similar activity. "The student can group objects into categories" illustrates this point. In this instance, the child is expected to classify objects rather than only group them.

With precise definitions of individual basic skills, instructional activities can be better designed to teach

them and the basic content. Separation of skill from content allows the teacher to concentrate on teaching skill or content.

After the basic skills in Tennessee's list were separated from the content, those which were related or synonomous were grouped together and were then classified into six major categories: observing, classifying, sequencing, communicating, comprehending, and writing. Within each of these major categories, related or sub-skills were ranked in order of difficulty. The simple skill was listed first and the most difficult last. Research in child development and psychology and in educational psychology as well as teacher experience determined the order in which the related skills were ranked. We recognized that overlapping may exist among the categories. To clarify, in order to classify objects, a child will have to observe the object. Or if the sequencing of a story is the required task, a child will have to comprehend the story. With that understanding, we defined each major category and each related skill using Webster's Dictionary and the intent of the basic skill statement as guidelines.

The final list of universal basic skills as compiled and presented to you today, consists of six major categories and forty related skills within those categories. The final classification and definition of each basic skill is not intended to indicate that it is the only correct list. Other broad categories should be identified; additional terms need defining; the rank order of the difficulty level should be tested; and other sub-skills should be included.

Rather than considering this as a final listing, it is seen by us, as a procedure for clarifying and defining the basic skills and the basic content children should learn. It is intended to make the teacher's instructional task easier and clearer. Using a matrix, the teacher can integrate the basic skills into any or all content areas. Children may receive instruction in the basic skills in all content areas thus reinforcing their learnings in each area. Further it may allow the teacher to sequence the basic skills and the basic content in a more compatible manner. It may simplify curriculum development because complex skills and content may be matched appropriately.

Research may reveal that basic skills, as defined in this paper, are learned quicker and easier. The relationship between basic skills and the child's cognitive development is readily seen. The three year old sorts objects by one characteristic whereas the nine year old sorts by three characteristics. In short, the cognitive level at which the child is functioning is clearly seen when basic skills are isolated from basic content. Also the teacher may determine if the child's difficulty is with acquiring the skill or learning the content. The teacher should be able to prepare more appropriate and effective instructional activities for pupils. Consequently, the children may acquire the required basic skills and basic content necessary for them to function in their society.

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Classifications and Definitions of Some Basic Skills

OBSERVING - paying special attention to people, objects, things, events, places.

- finding - discovering by accident or by research
- locating - finding the established position of a particular person, object, thing, event or place.
- investigating - examining systematically
- probing - investigating extensively
- interpreting - explaining the meaning and/or the significance in light of personal perceptions
- predicting - estimating or hypothezing possible outcomes
- problem solving - defining the problem, gathering data, suggesting possible solutions, testing suggestions, and evaluating results

COMMUNICATING - giving and receiving of information through words, gestures, speech, etc.

- listening - making a conscious effort to hear and to attend
- recalling - bringing back to mind
- telling - making known through speaking and writing
- describing - picturing, representing, or giving a detailed account of (verbally and/or non verbally)
- explaining - giving the meaning, the reason, the cause, and making plain or clear
- relating - connecting (associating) thought and/or meaning
- discussing - exchanging ideas, knowledge and different opinions and views
- inferring - concluding from known or assumed information
- summarizing - giving main points in concise, clear, brief form

COMPREHENDING - demonstrating a knowledge and understanding of information

recognizing - remembering something familiar from sensorial stimuli

identifying - recognizing the collective specific characteristics of a person, a place, an object or an event, thing

naming - verbalizing the nomenclature of a person, place, object, event, or thing.

labeling - tagging persons, places, objects, things, or events with it's appropriate name

defining - stating precise meaning

CLASSIFYING - arranging or grouping according to some system or principle.

associating - connecting in many various ways as in memory or imagery or thought

discriminating - differentiating symbols, objects, events, experiences, etc. through sensorial stimuli

contrasting - examining differences of 2 or more symbols, objects, events, experiences etc.

comparing - examining similiarities between/among 2 or more symbols, objects, events, experiences, etc.

matching - find 2 or more identical objects and/or symbols

pairing - place side by side two similar objects and/or symbols (characteristics, roles, functions, etc.

sorting - place into specific groupings

distinguishing - noting the unique characteristics of symbols, objects, events, experiences etc.

SEQUENCING - placing in a relative, continuous, and uniform pattern

following - succeeding in order, time or series

ordering - fixing, placing, keeping in a definite plan or system or pattern

counting - reciting and/or listing one by one in order

measuring - determining the dimensions, extent, amount, quantity, or capacity of, by a standard

inversing - placing in opposite order, relation, or effect.

reserving - completing a series of movements, changes or operations either backward and/or forward.

WRITING - forming specific correct abstract symbols such as characters, shapes, words or numbers.

drawing - producing representations in line form

coloring - applying colors

marking - indicating answers on a pencil-paper test and/or exercise with a writing utensil

tracing - following a course or trail of an object or representation

copying - producing exacting representations of letters, numerals objects, etc.

reproducing - forming images, forming specific correct abstract symbols such as characters, shapes, words, or numbers from memory.